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RADIO TEACHING THIRD WORLD FARMERS

by Rita Feutl

MANILA, IDRC -- As he stores his grain, a farmer in Botswana mixes it with wood ash, atechnique he learned from his forefathers. The ash acts as a natural insecticide, repelling the beetles and insects that would destroy his grain.

When he wants to mill the grain, the farmer simply winnows out the ashes. In this way he protects the precious food without the need for expensive modern pesticides.

Since 1979, this simple technique has become common knowledge in Mexico, India and parts of South America. Farmers in the Third World learned of this practice through the broadcasts of the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (DCFRN) that operates out of an office in Toronto, Canada, and a farmhouse in nearby Oakville.

The scripts, tapes and accompanying illustrations are prepared in Canada in English, French and Spanish and sent to radio stations for broadcast in developing nations.

George Atkins, a former farm broadcaster for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), founded the network to help the small farmers of the developing countries increase their food supply. By gathering and spreading information such as the ash technique he believes this goal will be achieved through improved production, decreased losses after production, and more efficient use of the food.

Atkins is always looking for agricultural techniques that farmers in Third

World countries have developed themselves and that might be useful to other farmers. He says he is constantly surprised by the ingenuity of people of little means.

The Filipino farmer has a simple but effective method of analyzing grain germination rates, for instance. He takes seeds from the top, middle, and bottom of his sack; mixes them; and places 100 seeds about 2 centimetres apart on a piece of muslin 10 metres square.

After five days, the farmer unrolls the cloth, counts the seeds that have sprouted, and calculates the germination percentage. If only 75 seeds have sprouted, then the germination rate is 75 percent, and he will have to plant 25 percent more seeds to be efficient.

Atkin's search for new ideas and audiences led him to China in late 1982. "Many excellent, simple techniques have been developed by the farmers over the centuries in China," he notes.

Using plastic or cardboard containers to grow tomato seedlings is too expensive, so the Chinese farmers mold a ball of dung and mud around the seed.

"This way, instead of a cup, you've got a gob of soil that is held together with the manure and it's got lots of nutrients in it."

When the seedling sprouts, the ball of soil is dropped into the ground.

But Atkins was not as successful at selling the radio network to the Chinese authorities as he was in picking up useful information. He showed them three items from previous shows translated into Chinese. One was the germination test; another dealt with rat control; the third was about growing rice on a raft when land was not available -- a technique Atkins had seen in Bangladesh.

Chinese government officials were interested in the idea of exchanging information that would benefit other Third World farmers, Atkins said. "They want to help other countries and here's a way that's ready-made for them to do it."

In fact, the deputy-director of the Information Institute for the Chinese Academy of Agriculture Science gave Atkins copies of their own farm magazines to take back to Canada. Atkins was pleased with their agreement to print some of DCFRN's scripts in the magazines, but he would prefer to see the information on the airwaves.

Some information from Farm Radio does reach China -- by shortwave radio. One agency in California broadcasts all over Southeast Asia, in Chinese. The response has been impressive. Atkins says that within two months, Radio Australia received 210 000 letters from listeners in China.

The idea of using radio to exchange agricultural information with developing countries goes back to 1975, when Atkins was loaned by the CBC to the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association. He and two farm commentators from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and All-India Radio conducted a workshop at the University of Zambia with broadcasters from all over Africa.

"I discovered that the farm broadcasters were really lacking the skills that would improve presentation of the material by radio. So I asked them if they would welcome outside information and more help in presenting it."

Atkins took up the idea and in 1979 DCFRN was born with the assistance of Massey Ferguson Ltd. The company still provides free office space and secretarial services, but the funding has been taken over by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) which provides $125 000 annually.

Atkins works out of his farmhouse in Oakville, but keeps in constant touch with his five full-time staff members, who transcribe tapes, draw the illustrations and translate the texts. The University of Guelph, Canada's main agricultural university, provides translators and tapes on which to edit the material.

The network service is free, provided the material is used to help farmers increase their food supplies. Not only farm broadcasters use the service, says Atkins. DCFRN users include teachers, government aid agencies and international

development offices.

The radio presentation of the agricultural information can vary from straight commentary to scripted dialogue or unscripted drama. Other methods of sharing the information with the subsistence farmer are film strips, puppet shows and posters.

Atkins says he will use any medium to get the information across, but he is convinced that radio is the best. He estimates that in many Asian countries there is one radio per family, and that one in 16 people in Africa owns a radio. In the South Pacific a radio and batteries cost less than US$4. "The first thing they (farmers) buy when they can afford anything is a radio," he says.

As Atkins points out, radio is a good vehicle to help farmers in the Third World help each other.

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